ON THE VERGE
A Novel

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By

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ABSTRACT

On the Verge is the first book in a young adult portal fantasy duology. Cassandra Olson, a nineteen-year-old woman from modern-day Saskatoon, disappears after a plane crash, only to reappear three months later in Saskatoon with no memory of the interim. Investigation into her missing memories leads her not only to the recovery of some of these memories, but also physically into another world entirely, in which magic exists and medieval culture dominates. The fantastic kingdom of Ceos is embroiled in a long war with the neighbouring kingdom of Nyen, and it looks to Cassandra as its saviour. Cassandra, struggling to cope with her own traumas in addition to her imposed role as "Protector," is forced to return to the horrors at the conflict's very centre.

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DEDICATION

For anyone who told me they were excited to read this.

cough Mom and Dad *cough*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ARTIST STATEMENT

On the Verge is a portal fantasy novel, part one of a duology, addressing the themes of warfare and trauma through the lens of young adult (YA) fiction. Thus, *On the Verge* is situated at the intersection of trauma and fantasy literature, utilizing techniques conventional to both while also fulfilling the predominantly hopeful expectations of YA novels.

The narrative of *On the Verge* transitions from its primary world in contemporary Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, to the medieval fantasy kingdom of Ceos, the secondary world–a narrative structure expected of portal fantasies, according to Brian Stableford (323). The primary and secondary worlds in *On the Verge* starkly contrast one another, and this disparity drives the plot; the novel's protagonist, Cassandra Olson, must successfully navigate the conflicts of the secondary world in order to return home by the duology's end (cf. Stableford 324). Cassandra's amnesia of her past experience in Ceos and her gradually returning memories of the same offer a richness to the story that allows for commentary on the structures enabling and encouraging the continuation of violence. This narrative trajectory aligns with Farah Mendlesohn's categorization of portal fantasies: defined as "quite simply a fantastic world entered through a portal," portal fantasies are also characterized by quest plotlines, manifestations of destiny, and narratives which "lead us gradually to the point where the protagonist knows his or her world enough to change it and to enter into that world's destiny" (173). One of the most celebrated portal fantasies, as both Mendlesohn and Stableford have acknowledged, is C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, but Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, as well as L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, are other notable examples.

No discussion of the fantasy genre, whether for young or mature readers, would be complete without acknowledging the contributions of J. R. R. Tolkien, especially regarding works primarily set in pseudomedieval worlds. The continuing success of *The Hobbit*, for example–initially enabled, according to C. W. Sullivan III, by simultaneous improvements in the contemporary publishing industry and education practices (440-441)–demonstrates how Tolkien's influence extends throughout the modern fantasy genre. Sullivan also suggests that the popularity of each of Tolkien's works amongst all age groups–regardless of the fact that *The Hobbit* was written for children, and *The Lord of the Rings* for adults–demonstrates the ability of the fantasy genre to transcend categories of age: "whatever age group [high fantasy] might have been written for, it is, in fact, read by all" (442). Yet, however much the genre may be open to readers of all ages, and however much readers in the 'young adult' category may seek literature above their designated age group, writing literature for children and young adults nonetheless presents challenges, as in the case of *On the Verge*, with respect to presenting themes of warfare.

However, before discussing the impact of such themes on younger readers, it is useful to address the interplay between medieval fantasy settings and serious contemporary issues. Despite how removed the medieval period is from a modern context, it nonetheless remains a setting conducive to explorations of such topics as warfare. In her study of Tamora Pierce's *Protector of the Small quartet* (1999-2002)–a series which significantly influenced *On the Verge*–Anne Melano posits that exploring modern injustices in such removed, romanticized settings might resonate more strongly than those set in contemporary society, as "[m]any of the problems that we continue to grapple with today such as the uses/abuses of power, the control of land, the nature of work, private vs. public interests and the ethics of war find potent symbols in medievalist iconography" (94). Indeed, in works of high fantasy, an imagined medieval culture is

a recurrent milieu, what Helen Young calls a "defining feature of the genre" (94). Elements of medieval society therefore proved inspirational in the process of worldbuilding for *On the Verge*–specifically, the infrastructure of late 13th- and early 14th century Britain, including means of warfare and defense mechanisms of castles, particularly during the reign of Edward I (1272-1307). For example, the layout of Caernarfon Castle in Wales (ca. 1283) inspired Trader's Village in *On the Verge*, just as the concentric designs of Harlech Castle (Wales; ca. 1285) and Beaumaris Castle (Wales; ca. 1295) influenced the castle in Ceos' capital city, Cenia.

Furthermore, ensuring plausible geographical features which align with the narrative trajectory and its pretechnological society was crucial in constructing the secondary fantasy world of *On the Verge*. For example, all settlements in *On the Verge* are located near sources of freshwater–mostly the five Great Rivers, which flow into the sea–and the distances between these communities aid in establishing convincing durations and means of travel, most often on foot or horseback. Moreover, the devastation of prolonged warfare, combined with the effects of magic draining from the land, has resulted in droughts, meagre harvests, and food shortages, as well as apparently irreversible damage to the secondary world itself, as apparent in the desolate land along the kingdoms' border, now referred to as the "Scalded Plains."

Besides establishing the medieval social conventions and mapping the topography, constructing the secondary world also required the creation of unique, fantastic elements, several of which enabled further examination of war and its aftermath. Such elements include lifestones, diminished magic, and unique flora and fauna, such as the curpax or griolds. The lifestones in particular become a potent symbol during wartime; these stones, unique to each person and long considered to be celebrations of individual life, are reduced to little more than a means of identifying bodies, indicative of war's ability to decimate the traditions of a society and its cultures. Representation of the aftermath of war, particularly the results of sustained exposure to traumatic situations, is therefore at the forefront of *On the Verge*.

Difficult content matter, such as war and trauma, in literature for younger readers has long been a controversial subject, and conversations on whether certain subject matter is "appropriate" for younger readers abound amongst contemporary critics. Hamida Bosmajian raises the moral obligation of an author writing trauma narratives for children, particularly those addressing the Holocaust, for narratives designed to "stun and shock" a young reader could in turn traumatize said reader (296). Conversely, Leigh Gilmore and Elizabeth Marshall claim that the motivation behind questioning such "appropriateness" stems from adults protecting their own idealized memory of childhood, rather than the realities contemporary adolescents face (par. 14). Still further, Amy Elliot argues that "[c]ontemporary children's trauma literature seeks to represent unspeakable atrocities and their effects to a young audience in order to teach readers to empathize with and respond to people (or, tragically, themselves) in traumatic situations" (180). Thus, the debate surrounding trauma narratives for children oscillates between representation for traumatized readers and protection from traumatizing readers.

Nonetheless, the subject of trauma is unquestionably at the centre of many works of YA. As Elliot states in her analysis of the popular YA dystopia *The Maze Runner* by James Dashner, "[w]e need look no farther than the proliferation of young adult dystopian novels populating the shelves to see not only the widespread appeal of the genre, but also the cultural permeation of traumatic situations throughout young adult literature" (180). Certainly, from Suzanne Collins' dystopian *The Hunger Games* to Leah Bobet's *An Inheritance of Ashes*, the concepts of war, horror, and grief are abundant. Given that such subject matter is obviously present–and popular–in YA literature, the question remains, then, how authors might represent trauma in a narrative

while recognizing their potentially vulnerable audience–that is, how authors might represent trauma without transferring the trauma onto the reader.

There are a number of literary techniques within the broad subject of "trauma literature" that are used to depict the experience of trauma. According to Kate Norbury and Anne Whitehead, trauma itself is resistant to linear, logical narrative (Norbury 32; Whitehead 3, 6). Some techniques include fragmented narrative, problems of memory, repetition, allusion, and deteriorating communication and relationships to represent trauma (Elliot 180; Norbury 32). *On the Verge* primarily utilizes disruptions in memory and temporality to convey trauma, though repetition plays a minor role as well. The most obvious manifestation of memory disruption is in Cassandra's amnesia, which ignites her curiosity and propels her journey back into the secondary world. Just as significant are the presence of nightmares and intrusive flashbacks, from the plane accident and, subsequently, from the war traumas she recalls over time. The repeated memory of the young boy that Cassandra recalls abandoning is especially important. Whitehead, drawing on the work of Cathy Caruth, recognizes the significances of ghosts in contemporary trauma fiction, in an observation that resonates with my own work: "The ghost represents an appropriate embodiment of the disjunction of temporality, the surfacing of the past in the present… The traces of unresolved past events, or the ghosts of those who died too suddenly and violently to be properly mourned, possess those who are seeking to get on with the task of living" (6). Similarly, the child "haunts" Cassandra, both in the way her thoughts dwell on him, and in the way her recurring flashbacks force her to revisit the moment when she first encountered him in the village of Saietum.

Besides Cassandra's flashbacks, she also demonstrates isolating behaviour, anger, and growing fear, as well as a generalized anxiety and restlessness. These symptoms align with Ciara Christensen's summation of categories of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, including re-experiencing symptoms, avoidance responses, negative changes to thoughts or mood, and changes to reactivity and arousal (600). Moreover, Cassandra's previous exposure to violence and death render her all the more vulnerable to new traumas upon her return, due to her current heightened state of stress (cf. van der Kolk and van der Hart 174). *The Armored Saint* by Myke Cole is a powerful, ruthless example of human reaction to trauma, one which assisted in articulating my own depictions thereof. As sixteen-year-old Heliose is made to witness the slaughter of an entire village, she enters a dissociative state, in that she feels separate from herself and can hear her own reactions to the event as if they "came from a long way off, another girl just like her" (63). Cassandra, too, experiences dissociation when she is once again exposed to the brutalities of warfare. However, Cole's novel is unrelenting in its depiction of gore and horror. His refusal to romanticize death is admirable, especially given the prevalence of warfare in many fantasy novels, but such ruthlessness returned my focus to that central argument of YA: what constitutes as appropriate for the audience, and to what extent trauma ought to be represented.

This question of trauma representation was thus central to writing *On the Verge*– specifically, in that this novel would not come to portray an overly simple resolution of trauma. Gilmore and Marshall, for example, acknowledge a tendency in authors of YA trauma literature to write "strategically grim" narratives:

> Although narratives for teen readers often depict danger and crises, we characterize them as strategically grim if crises resolve as a young protagonist steers out of harm's way. That is, resolution occurs as a matter of narrative convention, affirms the cultural construction of growing up as an individual, if perilous passage, and refrains from a

> critique of the formations that permit violence. At the heart of strategically grim narratives of trauma to YA audiences rests a bargain to represent trauma as consistent with closure and not as the grounds for critique of middle class family norms. (par. 18)

This "bargain," they claim, risks propagating the impression that trauma is but a "pedagogical" opportunity on the road to a successful adulthood (par. 20), and that narratives end up perpetuating societal norms rather than questioning them.

However, while Gilmore and Marshall are correct in identifying that resolution is found as a result of narrative convention, there is nevertheless room for innovative practices which fulfill the hopeful conventions of YA literature without presenting unrealistic engagements with trauma. Norbury, for example, studies four examples of contemporary teen fiction (published 2008-2011) in which complete recovery from trauma is represented as unattainable, but is not a hopeless venture:

> All four novels depict the possibility of recovery and conclude on a hopeful note. In this way, they satisfy expectations that teen fiction is fundamentally optimistic. However, as there is the tendency for repetition, indirection and especially for trauma to re-surface during periods of intense emotional crisis, the possibility that the character will experience similar symptoms and difficulties at some later stage in their lives remains. (33)

The trauma is therefore not permanently situated in the character's past–it is, as always, a present and persistent issue–but hope is nevertheless found in the improvement of characters' mental states. As Katherine Cruger attests, in her condemnation of rape as a plot device in the YA fantasy series *The Mortal Instruments* and *Throne of Glass*, recovery from trauma–when written well–can have restorative effects on readers (125-127).

My novel inhabits this area of tentative hope; Cassandra's journey through *On the Verge* focuses on uncovering a significant portion of her hidden traumas, but the duology as a whole centers on empathy and healing rather than detailed focus on the traumas themselves. By the end of part two, Cassandra will not be healed so completely as to be indistinguishable from the person she was before her trauma, nor to become an adult having learned a "lesson" from the experience. Rather, she will come to understand the importance of communication and community, in that acknowledging her traumas and sharing them with others will help her recovery process, whereas avoidance and isolation will impede healing (Capaldi et al. 210; cf. Elliot 185, 189). The opening in communication, not only within Cassandra's family, but also with her new acquaintances in Ceos and Nyen, will ultimately facilitate Cassandra's healing process, and enable others to start on their own paths to recovery.

Thematically, the *On the Verge* thus addresses warfare and trauma through the lens of young adult (YA) literature, firmly situating this fantasy novel within the context of trauma literature. To conclude, Tamora Pierce offers insight into the importance of fantasy for younger readers: "Fantasy creates hope and optimism in readers. It is the pure stuff of wonder, the kind that carries over into everyday life and colors the way readers perceive things around them" ("Fantasy: Why Kids Read It, Why Kids Need It" 51). It is my hope that *On the Verge* will encourage thoughtful consideration of the aftermath of war by recognizing and validating trauma, but in such a way that evokes empathy in the reader, and perhaps, as fantasy literature is apt to do, inspire hope for recovery in those struggling from similar situations.

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